ON LINEAL EXPRESSION AND ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN.*

PROPORTION.

In former remarks on the nature of Beauty, the writer came to the conclusion that right lines could not produce, but might essentially aid, its development in architecture. The importance of its aid is undeniable, and its analagous expression to the three principal qualities of strength, beauty, and grace, for instance, is certain, as shown by the three Grecian orders; or, rather, in these three columns we have the difference of proportion suited to three phases of the beautiful.

Form may be called the melody of architecture, with which proportion, and all other aids, should harmonise. As the form alters, so must the proportion, and for the innumerable varieties of expression which form is capable of producing, there must be as many varieties of proportion, and every slight deviation in proportion will produce a tantamount change in character. To give a strong massive prison the doors and windows of a Roman temple, would be wrong, if merely from the incongruity of character as expressed by proportion: it would be like giving to the body of the Farnese Hercules the beautiful limbs of the Apollo. The Strozzi Palace, Florence, is allowed to be a perfect work in its way,—harmonious, as a mass, and pleasing in the idea of compact strength which it presents to the mind. The whole form of this building is rather longer than a square; the cornice about one-thirteenth of the whole height; the door and windows, including their component mouldings, averaging rather more than a square in height. None of these proportions are beautiful in themselves, but they have the proportion which assimilates to actual strength, with an increase which tends towards the double square, which is beautiful; and they are excellent for expression of the required character. Proportion is nothing by itself, as in plane geometry for an artist's eye, but depends on the analogy of its character to the building in which it is used, and is to be gained only by study and observation,—very slightly, I believe, by innate perception: the two former will certainly inform us as to its efficacy, but the scientific rule which would determine it is surely most suspiciously to be received, if it be true that every variety of character requires a different proportion. Moreover, the unreasonableness of such a rule as an abstract truth, must, I think, be evident. Alberti says, the width of a space being 4 feet, and its length 8 feet, the proportionate height, or the height most agreeable to the eye, is 6 feet, as being equidistant from 4 and 8; but make this form and it certainly has no particular charm. Others say, the width being 4 feet, and the length 8 feet, the height should be three-fourths of the two added together; but the proportion thus produced bears in itself no claim to the beautiful. Even were they correct, as proportion must vary to suit the character of the building, these, or any other rules, can never be unchangeable. Surely we have sufficient examples on which to ground our knowledge of the general principle of proportion, without shutting our eyes to the existing proofs of it, and seeking blindly for its laws in any science. Take, as an instance, the doorway of St. Sebastian, Mantua, by Alberti, and the door of a house, Verona, by Sanmichele. Here are two apertures relatively proportioned, each being much less than a double square, and with neither proportion does the beautiful work around assimilate well. Yet, of the two, is not the breadth and massiveness of Alberti's detail best, because the ornament and proportion more nearly approach each other in character? Here it is evident that much less than a double square does not suit graceful ornament; but in Italian architecture generally, and in classic too, a double square does unite with the beautiful character of its surrounding work. And in cinque-cento, where everything tends to grace, and even to weakness, we find the proportions becoming more and more elongated. This is as regards various changes of the beautiful, the essence of which is variety, and this enforces a degree of regularity, without which it would run into irregularity, which is the essence of the picturesque. That all things which we may justly call beautiful are subject to this rule of a varied regularity, may be seen by looking at the proportions of human beings, and many other beautiful animals; and that the rule of irregularity prevails in the proportions of the picturesque, is seen in the branches of trees, the edges of rocks, &c. For this reason any architecture essentially picturesque in its character, may be more capricious in its proportions, without detraction to its merit as excellent art, although in such a case the fundamental effects of proportion should be known and kept in mind.

The proportions of window openings and interspaces, of openings and their architraves, are not to be set out invariably on the dicta of any men—the first especially must in practice materially depend upon necessity; and moreover, it may be remarked, that even where windows have only the same space as themselves between them, the same idea of breadth and strength which more than double their width between them gives, may be gained by extra height between their heads and the cills of the next floor openings; and though we owe much to the investigators on proportion as to the effect of inter-widths, we have no data, if I remember rightly, about inter-heights, which, for a noble appearance in a building, should be as great as is usually possible. As to the proportion of architraves being not less than a sixth or more than a fifth of the void, it is difficult to conceive on what grounds it is asserted. Many most excellent openings, even in Italian architecture, have more—the gate of Ghiberti, at Florence, for instance. In other styles it would be useless to particularise what would be the general rule.

Not that from this it is to be inferred that in classical art these rules of proportion can be harmlessly played with by every one. Rules of whatever kind are most valuable when not meant to repress design, and as a starting point from which we may see how we can effect improvement. Indeed, though they have had the effect of making architecture a commonplace business, executed by commonplace men; yet to one who has been tossed about in the uncertainty of original design, they are like *terra firma* to his unsteady footing. These rules of proportion, especially, are most difficult and most valuable, and that they have been departed from at times with great success, is no depreciation of their use for the ordinary practitioner. These deviations were effected by men of great genius, guided by study.

Variety of proportion is, however, necessary; but this difference will, in ordinary buildings, be of so slight a nature, as to be unperceived by the public, and can be easily ascertained by taking the double square in vpide for the standard proportion, and so on in other fixed proportions. That the proportions must needs vary, may be inferred from the fact, that a balustrade on the ground and a balustrade over the cornice ought not to be the same; that a column, perfect as a ground support, would require an alteration when placed on a basement; and that the Doric columns of ancient Greece are not quite fitted for a balustrade without alteration, as I have often seen them. The necessity for this difference of proportion in one subject is well shown by the different heights of the three orders.

An acute and valued investigator of the principles of art has asserted that irregularity of proportion is the cause of beauty in architecture, and has brought forward a Grecian cornice as a proof; but he has been misled by the seeming irregularity of a portion of a whole, and however varied a cornice may be in its inferior divisions, yet it bears a regular proportion to the whole mass, and to each individual member of that mass, founded on a scale taken from the diameter of the base of the support or column, to which all the subjects of the composition, dado, base, shaft, capital, and entablature are referable in regular quantities. There are other examples given, but none so apparently confirmatory as this, of a very dangerous error, viz., that irregularity is productive of beauty. Were this the case, the most confused forms would be the most beautiful. Irregularity means without rule, and is only applicable to the picturesque.

FOREGROUND AND BACKGROUND.

Everything is enhanced or lessened in value by its concomitants: *setting off*, to use a common expression, is much neglected, often entirely disregarded, and yet is a matter of much import. The toll of the cathedral-bell, heard by night in some deep and gloomy valley, sounds awfully and warningly, and has a terror in its measured solemnity; yet the same sound heard in the sunny cloisters, where the wild weeds grow and the lizard has no fear, becomes tranquillising and melancholy; and as you rest in some retired nook, and catch the sweet voices of the choristers and the pealing of the organ, in harmony with the rustling of the green leaves, you enjoy a holy pleasure, which the same strain could never impart in the crowded hall, though executed by the most celebrated artists.

The character of everything changes with the character which surrounds or accompanies it. Westminster Abbey has never been a Gothic cathedral to me: even at night, the distant roar of the troubled world destroys that feeling of serene and perfect quiet which seems to shadow forth the quiet of heaven. This cathedral has never seemed to me to belong to modern London, but rather to be the valued, venerable, and glorious relic of a past state of society, a past creed, and a past age, to which we of the present day bear but a slight affinity.

In architecture, this setting off is gained by the foreground and background: every building, to form itself into a perfect picture, must have these; and it seems to me a great error, even in the largest buildings, to suppose that they contain these advantages in themselves. Such buildings as Whitehall, or the Library of St. Mark's, Venice, the Farnese, &c. have evidently no claim to such an arrangement, nor has an ancient Grecian temple,—yet they are considered perfect works of art in all respects. In these and in all buildings, the work itself does in reality form the principal composition, to which the surrounding buildings and figures, or nature, form the foreground, and the surrounding distance and sky the background. That this is the case is allowed by painters, and is the method of their making architectural pictures. How well does the irregularity of Gothic outline harmonise with the jagged clouds of a northern sky—with the sharpness and action of our climate; and how well does the calm beauty of a Grecian temple agree with the unclouded expanse of its bright blue atmosphere—with the repose of a climate where days and nights glide on equally serene and equally beautiful. There is more in this analogy of character, perhaps, than we are apt to believe; extending even to the costume of the people who move around us, and which makes the modern citizen's dress become worse than nothing among the ruins of ancient Egypt.

A neglect of the necessary accompaniments of a new building, or a want of good taste arising from a love of novelty, or a blind admiration for some particular style, too often leads to the grossest anomalies in this respect, and many buildings, excellent in themselves, are so placed as to seem dropped down there from some other world. This is a complaint under which we suffer, which has no cure but time; but if we work up to the *principle* before expressed, we shall avoid over-irregularity in a large city, whose size and grandeur demand a certain degree of simplicity and massiveness, and keep our more fanciful ideas for their picturesque and rural attributes, rocks, trees, clouds, and running waters; and be likewise sure that the picturesqueness of a castellated building on the Rhine, rock mounted and surrounded, is not the picturesqueness which is fitted to a castle situated amid quiet lawns and well-trimmed gardens.

That this principle should be advocated is the more necessary from the fact, that those high in authority, whose influence the student feels, do often expressly denounce anything but the study of the actual building in considering a design, and have by this teaching themselves left the breach open by which we are flooded with imitations of all the styles of antiquity, without regard to their situation, and have given ground for belief that all buildings possess that advantage in themselves, to which even St. Peter's or St. Paul's but slightly attain.

In making the rough sketch of an intended building, it should be done from various points, and always in relation to the objects

* See p. 466, ante.

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